

# THE BLACK PANTHER

By Michael White

Drawings by Wladyslaw T. Benda

**F**EW men have been privileged to glance behind the curtain of an Indian Prince's family affairs. For this there are sufficient reasons, as witness the case of Dr. Ward of San Francisco. You may believe his story or not, just as you please; but those who know best say it is more than probable. It was an Incipient Stage that drew him across the Pacific and eventually landed him in Shivabad. He didn't care a bacillus for occult yogis, Jain temples, or ancient tombs; but he was mightily interested in the Incipient Stage of a terror which literally flyeth by night. That was why Dr. Ward was entirely satisfied to settle down in Shivabad, when the chance tourist sped from its burning heat, fever impregnated dirt, and unholy smells as fast as a ramshackle tonga could travel. As sure as Kismet the Incipient Stage was there; for Shivabad was the Capital of a native State, with a ruler whose public health ideas, and much else, were medieval. It was picturesque, of course, when not too close, to observe the street cleaning department of cur dogs and crows at work.

But that is all this story has to do with the Incipient Stage; for very soon the doctor found himself involved in other stirring matters.

It would seem that about the time of Dr. Ward's arrival the days of the old Maharaja Sahib were numbered. At least the Maharaja thought so, not being deceived by his astrologers, who predicted that he would live forever if he repeated certain mantras, at so much a mantra; but he wanted to be certain in order that he might depart this world in accord with ancient custom. So he sent for the American hakim, in other words Dr. Ward.

Thus it came about that the doctor's professional brethren might have opened their eyes rather wide on beholding him driving furiously to the palace in the Maharaja's silver mounted C-spring barouche, with a right of way cleared by a detachment of the Maharaja's fierce lancers. He had received many hurry calls in the course of his practice; but never one attended by quite so much style, dust, and tumult. Even so, at one point he prepared for a jump, when an elephant loomed up not twenty paces ahead. But somehow the huge beast was shoved aside half into a coppersmith's shop, and the barouche rattled on with shouts and curses following.

**T**HE Maharaja Sahib received Dr. Ward reclining on a rich couch, propped up by cushions. The couch had been moved out on a kind of balcony to catch any breath of air stirring. Nearby stood bronze visaged attendants,—bearers of a ms, fly whisks, slippers, etc. The Maharaja presented but the relic of a fine physical human being, much emaciated by sickness and old age. For all that, he wore garments of embroidered tussler silk and several magnificent jewels. Also he preserved an air of proud dignity, which, according to his lights, became high caste as well as royal rank. When it is remarked that he had invariably declined to meet on an equal footing low caste Kings with more official guns and bigger treasure chests than himself, nothing more need be said. In his own estimation he stood several steps higher than the Viceroy, while as to European sovereigns they were all yesterday parvenus in comparison. That was why he was such a stickler for ancient forms and ceremonies.

In the cursory personal examination permitted, Dr. Ward saw no hope for the Maharaja; and the Maharaja was quick to discern that unfavorable opinion written on the physician's face.

"Yes, I know what you are going to tell me," he said. "You are not like those astrologers, afraid to speak the truth. But from you what I want to know is the moment of my death."

"That I cannot exactly foretell," replied the doctor. "It all depends upon your Highness' strength. You may last for a day or two, or pass away in a few hours. That is speaking frankly, as I understand you wish."

A look of dissatisfaction swept across the Maharaja's face. "Well," he questioned, after a reflective pause, "you would know the moment of my death when it comes?"

"Yes, I may say I would," acquiesced Dr. Ward, holding back a purely professional point of argument.

"Wah! Wah! That is better spoken," exclaimed the Maharaja. "You shall stay here to tell my Minister, Narayan Rao, the moment it happens. It is important that he should be so informed. More than that is not for you to know."

"Or to inquire," returned the doctor rather coldly. "My efforts do not extend into the region of state, or other secrets."

"*Ai! Ai!*" The Maharaja's dark eyes gleamed with all the vitality remaining in his body. "I see you are a man to be trusted, not like those English, always prying into matters that do not concern them. When you have told Narayan Rao, you will go away with a hand on your mouth. For that you will be well recompensed."

The Maharaja drew from his finger a ring containing a superb table-cut emerald, and handed it to the doctor.

"A present from a Brahman King," he made a gesture signifying that the gift was merely a royal trifle. "As we have talked so it is settled."

"If you wish me to remain, of course I shall do so," Dr. Ward bowed in acknowledgment.

"Yes, to tell Narayan Rao when it happens. That is all. Now," he beckoned to his attendants, "I will be carried to the Hall of the Panther. See to it that the Doctor Sahib is given a room adjoining, and that he does not call twice for what he wants. Thus I have spoken, for the last time."

**T**HE sword, fly whisk, and other bearers gathered round the Maharaja, and presently muscular khitmutgars hoisted the couch to their shoulders. Then in a procession, with the doctor bringing up the rear, a sinuous way through dark passages, over roofs, and down time worn stone stairs was taken. At last they emerged into a court, the like of which had never captured the doctor's imagination; for the exterior gloomy palace walls gave no hint of such a treasure within. Given four cloistered walls and a pool of clear water in the middle, and you have the facts of the picture; but then—the spiral columns rose as light as air, the fretwork marble screens might have been carved by spiders, and the reflections in the pool mingled the turquoise of the sky with the pearl like whiteness of the surrounding buildings. No fountain splash disturbed the subtle repose of the scene, whose general effect gave the idea of a floating transparency.

In a few moments the party crossed the court and entered a hall which smote the eyes with darkness in comparison with the intense light without. As Dr. Ward crossed the threshold a cry echoed through the hall, which he at first took to be that of an infant, possibly one of the Maharaja's numerous progeny brought to receive a final benediction; but, as his eyes gradually became tuned to gather in the richness of floral decorations and carving on walls and ceiling, they presently fell on a startling object. Clinging to the gilded bars of a cage set in one of the walls was a panther whose coat was as the shade of blackest night. People with little admiration for panthers could hardly have denied that there was a tribal specimen worthy of the gold and jeweled collar she wore. A repetition of the infant wail was followed by a deep chested purring sound of satisfaction, as the Maharaja was set down facing the panther's cage.

Evidently the Maharaja and the panther were on friendly terms; at least so thought Dr. Ward. That the Maharaja should choose a black, silken coated, savage beast to center his last thoughts upon, was professionally no affair of the attending physician's. He was accustomed to witness strange things, concerning which he kept his own counsel. He was busy giving directions for making his patient as comfortable as possible, when a whisper floated down from above the panther's cage. Dr. Ward glanced quickly upward, to notice a lattice screen and behind it the suggestion of fluttering raiment. The next moment his attention was drawn to the entrance of a portly native, of shrewd, crafty mien. The native introduced himself as Narayan Rao, the Maharaja's Minister, and was profuse with apologies and compliments.

"That panther," he explained; "yes, she held in great esteem by the Maharaja. He think she reincarnation of his grandmother. Very fine woman! She burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Her hand stained on palace gate as she go out. But now that happen no more. Maharaja Sahib very much for progress."

Dr. Ward did not dispute the point; but, from the little he had seen of the Maharaja, he was inclined to doubt the Minister's statement regarding progress. He was presently shown to a spacious apartment, where the usual Indian comforts of cool drinks and a bath had been prepared.

In due course an excellent evening meal was served, and then Dr. Ward returned to take another look at his patient. Darkness was gathering rapidly, and lamps



The Maharaja's Pet Ceaselessly Paced Back and Forth.

had been kindled in the great hall, giving just enough light to cast upon the scene an atmosphere of vague mystery. The Maharaja still lay decked out in royal finery in front of the panther's cage; but his pet had grown restless and was pacing back and forth behind the bars, every now and then emitting a whine or a snarl. Above the panther's cage a little light twinkled in the lattice screen and the whispering went on ceaselessly. Back in the deeper shadows ghostly white robed figures slipped about noiselessly. To every sound there came an echo.

Fortunately, physicians are not likely to see in mere strangeness of things a supernatural agency; so Dr. Ward was able to concentrate attention on his patient. There was really nothing that he could do for the Maharaja, who had dropped off into semiconsciousness. He might exist for several hours, or pass away suddenly. As the doctor bent down to listen to the Maharaja's respiration, he caught a few words which bore a terrible significance subsequently.

"*Sati!* I have ordered—English not prevent—not know—panther."

The Maharaja's words fell away in what sounded very like an anathema hurled at the English. Dr. Ward lifted his head, to meet the eyes of the panther, in flashes of yellow and green, directed full upon him. The beast stood motionless, a sinister black object against the deeper shade of the inner cage. Dr. Ward merely thought it was just as well that the gilded bars between him and the panther were of substantial thickness. Above that a little light twinkled, and the whispering was of several women's voices. He turned, to confront Narayan Rao standing beside the Maharaja's couch.

"The Maharaja," said the doctor, "is somewhat delirious; but not in any pain. He seems to possess a fair reserve of strength, which may hold out till morning; but I can't say definitely. We ought to have oxygen ready in case of a sinking spell; but, except what little there is in the air, I guess there isn't any within hundreds of miles. I'll go and lie down for awhile; but if any change is noticeable call me."

So Dr. Ward went back to his apartment. He stretched himself on a cane chair, and took up the translation of a treatise on Hindu medicine, which had been thoughtfully provided for his entertainment. It could hardly have been meant for instruction, so astonishing were the remedies advised for the hot and cold disorders into which oriental medical practice divides all human ailments. The general principle seemed to be that if the patient succumbed no more was to be said; if he recovered he was in wonderful luck, that is, in Dr. Ward's opinion.

**T**HE doctor had laid the book down to light a cheroot, when he was startled to observe part of the wall actually moving slowly outward, as if guided by a faltering hand. He stared with eyes wide open, as well he might; for the moving part of the wall took the form of a door, the existence of which he had not before sus-



pected. Presently in the aperture stood a woman, a youthful, admirably proportioned figure, draped in material of such filmy whiteness that she appeared like a wraith. White flowers set in her hair assisted the impression. Dr. Ward instantly perceived that his visitor's features were of that Aryan type of loveliness sung by the Hindu poets, but never permitted to the out-cast occidental gaze. He was also quick to notice that he had never before remarked terror so poignant on a beautiful human face. He was saved the puzzling question of what action to take by her moving forward, holding in her hands jeweled trinkets which she had evidently stripped from her person. In a moment she had sunk down at his feet, offering him the trinkets in an attitude of supplication.

"Feringee Sahib Hakim," she whispered, in accents burdened with more dread than grief, "Maharaja save!"

Dr. Ward's first thought was that he was confronted with a painful but not unfamiliar situation, a daughter pleading with him for her father's life; but the look of terror shot from beneath her upraised lashes and the quaver of fear in her voice signified otherwise than sorrow. He glanced into a short passage connecting his apartment with the hall, rose quickly, and bolted a door to cut off observation from that direction. Then he returned to persuade his visitor to sit beside him on the cane chair and relieve her mind of its evident distress. After a pause of hesitancy the single word "panther" fell from her lips. At the same time a shiver ran through all her frame.

"Panther!" repeated Dr. Ward. "Now tell me what that beast has to do with your coming here. If you want me to help you, you must not hold back anything. You may be sure I wish to be your friend." This is the literal English translation of more Hindustani than Dr. Ward would have believed he had picked up.

THEN came a story from the depths of a terrified nature, which sent the blood tingling in hot wrath through the doctor's veins. It left him without a particle of professional or other care for the Maharaja; but a vast amount on behalf of the victim at his side. This was its substance:

Jareha Bai—the Lady Jareha—was the youngest wife of the Maharaja. She had been brought to the palace recently, and had barely set eyes on her aged husband. Political reasons had prompted her marriage while the Maharaja was practically on his deathbed. His strict adherence to ancient custom had prompted him to order suttee,\* or widow sacrifice, at his death. But, as the law of the British was absolute against widow burning, he had planned to circumvent it by other means. Back of the panther's cage was a trap door leading to a small chamber. At the moment of the Maharaja's death the trap door was to be raised, and the panther would find a shrinking, helpless woman. As the Maharaja's other wives had declined the honor,—those of the whispering voices, doubtless,—it had descended on Jareha Bai, the newcomer. For her there was no escape, unless by the skill of the Hakim Sahib. She had managed to reach the American doctor by one of the passages with which the walls of the palace were honeycombed.

Naturally, the story was told with stress and emotion faintly conveyed by this recital of the bare facts, and at its conclusion she had cast her arms about the doctor, imploring his protection. For several minutes he sat staring blankly into space, horrified at the thought that upon his word, which must soon be given, hung her doom. Presently he pulled himself together, and, while working his brain harder than he had ever done in his life, strove to nerve the Princess to a realization that her only chance for life lay in both of them keeping fear or emotion absolutely under control. He was relieved when a strain of Persian or Afghan blood in her veins conquered the terror of a weaker race.

"As the Sahib says, that will I do," she determined, with confidence gathering on lips that any Feringee Sahib might yearn to possess.

"Yes, you must trust to me," he answered. "Before that trap door goes I'll do something, if I have to tackle that infernal beast with my bare hands."

But what was he to do? At any moment her absence from the little room back of the panther's cage might be discovered; but another minute and he might be called

to certify to the Maharaja's death. Then how could he prevent the tragedy of the panther taking place? He cursed his forgetfulness in leaving his revolver at the dak bungalow. He had brought only his case of scalpels, and another of hypodermic needles. Of what use could they be, unless to put both the Princess and himself out of torture in the worst emergency? Suddenly an idea flashed upon him. He wheeled upon her and spoke tersely, though in a tone of deep earnestness of purpose.

"You must escape from the palace before I give the word that the Maharaja is dead!"

"But how can I do so? I must pass through the Hall of the Panther, and would be discovered."

"I have taken that into account. I intend to raise a disturbance in there, during which you might slip through the hall unobserved. Could you then find your way out of the palace?"

"Yes; but where am I to go, Sahib, so that I shall not be brought back?"

"To the dak bungalow, where I will follow. You must try and get there somehow."

The Princess drew back as if fearful of tempting a new and unknown danger. But the hour was not for standing on convention; so he placed his arm about her protectingly.

"You must trust me. You must believe me when I say that I love you in your hour of distress, and, if luck helps us out, when it has passed over. I guess this is what people call Fate."

"But, Sahib, behold I am already in the white clothes of a widow. In the streets they may stone me."

"The savages!" he muttered between set teeth, only with a harder word interposed. "Think of stoning a

entirely upon the nerve the physician might possess.

"Remember," were his last words, "if you hear a row in the hall, that is your chance to escape!"

Then he thrust her back into the way whence she came.

DOCTOR SAHIB, there is no doubt the Maharaja is dead!" Such was the news he received when he stepped out into the Hall of the Panther. He yawned as if just roused from sleep, and strode over to the royal couch. He thrust aside the gathering of attendants and took the Maharaja's hand in his, pressing a finger on the wrist.

"Does the Doctor Sahib give the word?" asked Narayan Rao, with a glance toward the panther's cage.

The Doctor Sahib would have liked very much to throttle the Prime Minister for the sake of that glance; but he held himself well in hand. "Certainly not!" he replied. "Dead? Not at all! His Highness is resting easily. I know what I am talking about," he added with an air of authority, catching doubtful expressions on surrounding faces. "The crisis is over for the time being. I should not be surprised if the Maharaja woke in the morning much refreshed. But you must not crowd round him like this," he ordered, "and I want a small cup of warm water."

Narayan Rao gave directions that the Doctor Sahib be obeyed. In a little while the cup of warm water was brought. The doctor emptied three parts of its contents. Then he drew out his hypodermic case, uncorked a glass tube, and from it dropped a tablet into the remaining water. He stirred the water with his finger until the tablet had dissolved. Then he fitted a needle in the syringe, and pretended to give himself an injection.

"Just to keep myself awake," he nodded to Narayan Rao.

Meanwhile he had concealed the syringe in the region of his coat sleeve. All this was done as if no desperately harassing problem was on his mind—to the extent of a woman's life at stake with every passing moment. He strolled calmly up and down, gradually nearing the panther's cage. The panther sat on her haunches, flashing her green eyes upon him. Presently he halted in front of her cage. With an angry snarl the beast sprang forward to the bars, beating them with her paws in her rage. Dr. Ward stepped back a pace, and the panther, baffled of her purpose, dropped from the bars. Glaring with full eyes, she presently turned her flank. Quickly the doctor's hand shot between the bars, and the hypodermic needle was pressed home near to the panther's spine. The faint click of a full charge injected was lost in a returning paroxysm of the beast's anger.

"If the Doctor Sahib pleases," cried Narayan Rao, hastening forward, "that animal is very jealous of the Maharaja. She might do the Doctor Sahib harm if he ventures too close to her cage."

"Ah!" replied Dr. Ward. "Yes, she seems a bit fierce. I thought she looked sick; but probably I was mistaken."

Then he waited, pacing up and down as before, but with an eye turned constantly on the panther's cage. How long, he wondered, would it take for the injected poison to work? He had no idea of the dose required to kill a panther. A twentieth part of what he had given would settle a man.

"Doctor Sahib," Narayan Rao halted him at a turn, "we feel sure the Maharaja is dead."

The doctor glanced over his shoulder, to see that the panther had flopped down and was gasping for breath.

"You need not trouble about the Maharaja," he replied; "but I'll bet a lac of rupees the Maharaja's panther will be dead in half a minute. Look for yourself."

HE raised his voice so that it might be heard by everyone. Instantly the wild confusion he anticipated seized hold of all present. If, as the Doctor Sahib said, the Maharaja would wake in the morning, and find his panther dead, then beatings were in store for those he chose to hold responsible. Those that did not crowd in front of the panther's cage prepared to decamp. Thirty voices filled the air, each accusing the other of the panther's death. For the time being the Maharaja was forgotten. In the midst of the tumult, the Doctor gave vent to a breath of relief when he saw a muffled figure steal swiftly through the back of the hall and unimpeded into the dark court. Realizing that it might hazard her chance of escape to follow immediately, he waited until he reckoned she had gained freedom from the palace. Then he insisted that Narayan Rao give him an attendant to pilot the way to the nearest exit. If the Maharaja needed his services before morning, a messenger would bring him at once; but he hardly thought that would be likely. His Highness was still resting comfortably.

Narayan Rao was in such a state of excitement that he had complied with the doctor's request, before comprehending its significance. Of a truth the Maharaja would not require Dr. Ward's services again!

Meanwhile the doctor had dismissed his attendant at the palace gate. He hastened on through the silent and deserted bazaars with a searching gaze directed ahead. In a little he discerned the figure he sought. A few strides brought him to her side, and a pressure of his hand assured her of protection thenceforth. But as they went along, the problem of how to get out of Shivabad before the flight of the Princess was discovered rose upon his mind. He realized that it might be a difficult matter to carry a Hindu Princess out of a native State. Those fierce whiskered lancers would quickly be on their trail.

Turning a corner, he espied a curtained bullock cart standing before a native residence. It was rather a gaudy carriage, as it transpired, owned by a money-

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Her Look of Terror Signified Otherwise than Sorrow.

woman escaping from the jaws of a panther!" He cast his eyes upward, to notice an embroidered drapery of dark material on the wall. He promptly tore it down and wrapped it round the form of the Princess.

"You can fix it to look like one of the cloaks the women wear in the streets here," he suggested.

Just then came a rapping on the door and a voice cried, "Doctor Sahib! Doctor Sahib! The Maharaja is dead!"

"Great Heavens!" he ejaculated. "Quick!" he urged her. "If you manage to get through to the dak bungalow, tell my servant from me to have some sort of conveyance ready. But I will try and overtake you on the way."

There is one occasion when it is fitting that the rules of society be cast aside. That is when the chasm of eternity yawns beneath our feet. So he took her in his arms and kissed her between the eyes. The chances were not good that they would meet again. It depended

\* Though the law against suttee is rigorously enforced whenever possible by the British, yet in the secrecy of Indian palaces it probably still takes place in one form or other. The imprints of henna stained hands on palace walls, the sign of widow sacrifice, are shown with too much pride for one to feel confident that the custom has been completely abolished. Unless public scandal develops, British officials are compelled to avoid probing into what goes on behind the purdah.



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tried to be very cheerful. "And now what?"

"Where do you live?" asked Dunlop.

"On 59th-st. west," she said.

"Then," said he, "I'd better take you home. We will go by the way we came and try to find Derrick, and we can talk as we go, and decide what is best to do. But for my part I have only one thing to say. But whatever you wish shall be done."

They left Stamford, and began to climb toward the distant Westchester hills.

"What," said she, "is that one thing you have to say?"

"Those," said Dunlop quietly, "whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

"But you can't really feel that way about us," she said.

"Can't I!" said he with gallantry. And, being in a tender mood, he ran the car into a ditch so as to leave intact the life and foolishness that is gathered in the breast of a rooster.

"But I hope you don't," she said, "because—this is my second marriage, and my other husband is alive."

Dunlop was more hurt and miserable than he could have explained. He made no comment; but set his lips tightly together, stared straight ahead, and drove the car with a kind of suppressed and angry recklessness. For half an hour the girl studied his face. Then, when the road dipped into a wood, she said:

"Stop, please."

He stopped the car. And then, still staring stonily ahead, he was aware of two arms suddenly thrown about his neck, and of a touch upon the lips that filled him from head to foot with bliss so intense that it amounted to pain. "It's a lie about the other!" she cried. "I told it to see how you really felt."

MASTERS and his friends had really begun to be anxious about Dunlop, when there sounded suddenly out of the night the sharp honking of an automobile horn.

"He must have gone to Stamford with them," said Barker, "and they are bringing him back."

They went in a body to meet the returned adventurer.

Dunlop was already out of the car, and, his arm round her waist, was supporting a girl who seemed drooping with fatigue.

"Give us food and drink," said Dunlop. "We have had an adventure."

The dinner table had been cleared; but Masters caused it once more to groan. But when Dunlop and his wife had finished their blushing narrative, the others shook their heads.

Dunlop had finished by saying, "So Masters wins his bet; because any way you look at it this wonderful thing that has happened to us comes under the shape of an adventure."

But the others shook their heads.

"The agreement," said Masters, "the stipulation, was that the adventure should happen right here on my private property; but you have found it necessary to go to the ends of the earth, to Stamford even. No, according to what has happened to you, I lose the bet; but what has happened to you is, after all—well, interesting enough to the persons concerned; but all in the day's work. Now, you two forget about it, and just sit tight until you have heard what happened during the day to Barker and Harbinger."

THE END

## The Black Panther

Continued from page 7

lender, who gilded the horns of his bullocks to proclaim his wealth, and decorated the panels of the vehicle with strange gods for good luck. As luck would have it, too, the moneylender was on the threshold of his house, preparing to set forth at an early hour to catch and squeeze some farmers. Dr. Ward meant to have that bullock cart; so he tackled the moneylender promptly.

"Babuji," said he, "I need your carriage to take me to Shahpur at once. I'm willing to pay a good price; but I'm going to have it anyway. I'd hate to proceed to violence; but two minutes is all I can give your choice."

The moneylender glanced at the doctor's companion, and formed a conclusion which fortunately was far from the truth. He also looked at the roll of paper money tendered by the doctor. It was more than he hoped to squeeze from the farmers. Therefore a fat hand closed on the bills, and the doctor was in temporary possession of the carriage. It was hardly the state in which a princess of the House of Shivabad might expect to travel; but in the veil of that night lay her deliverance. Shahpur was twenty miles away in British territory. At Shahpur was an American mission, where a certain rite could be performed legally, if such was desired; also a railway station.

In the early dawn the pair of bullocks attached to the moneylender's cart trotted merrily into that place, the Maharaja's fierce lancers racing up too late at the line.

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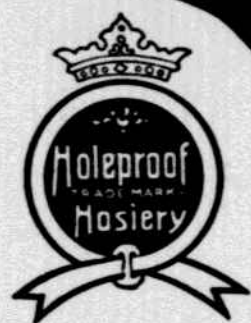
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